

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 78 | Number 2 (Spring 2019)

pps. 226-227

Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization

S Zebulon Baker
Miami University in Ohio

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Baker, S Zebulon. "Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization."
The Annals of Iowa 78 (2019), 226-227.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12576>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization, by Winton U. Solberg. Urbana, Springfield, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018. xii, 302 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$99 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewer S Zebulon Baker is director of the University Honors Program at Miami University in Ohio. He received the State Historical Society of Iowa's 2014 Throne-Aldrich Award for his article, "'This affair is about something bigger than John Bright': Iowans Confront the Jim Crow South, 1946–1951," in the *Annals of Iowa* (2013).

Winton U. Solberg's *Creating the Big Ten* explores the founding and first half-century of the Big Ten Conference, one of the Midwest's most enduring cultural institutions. The Big Ten's origin story, as an association of the Midwest's top universities that "held the promise of imposing order on intercollegiate football in the Midwest" (17), has been told by sportswriters and historians alike, most notably Robin Lester, Brian Ingrassia, and, especially, Murray Sperber. But unlike many of these commentators, Solberg does not use his study to simply critique the current state of college sports. As he sees corruption and commercial demands overtaking the conference in the twenty-first century, Solberg turns to the Big Ten's past to understand how its present state—a multibillion-dollar, 14-institution enterprise expediently stretched from the Northern Plains to the Mid-Atlantic for the sake of TV ratings—has become "a strange perversion of the true spirit of university life" (241). To understand this competitive and commercial juggernaut, he soberly surveys how the Big Ten evolved in its first five decades from "a pioneer in institutional cooperation in the control of intercollegiate athletics" (15) to "the premier intercollegiate athletic conference in the nation" (62) by the interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s, where he sees the seeds of its current corrupted condition being sown.

Solberg devotes the first third of the book to studying how the Big Ten "reduced disorder to order in collegiate football" in the first quarter-century after its founding in 1895 by implementing a strong system of faculty governance and committing to the amateur athletic code (74). Yet the twin challenges of the two decades between the world wars—commercialization and professionalization of football—threatened to plunge the conference back into disorder, a crisis that provides the focus of the balance of the book. Football was ascendant after World War I, especially as the public imagination fired the "Golden Age of Sports" in the 1920s. Solberg expertly charts how "the Big Ten guardians of amateur athletics" (89) struggled mightily in this atmosphere to prevent their association from succumbing to the allure of professional sports. Red Grange's decision to sign a professional contract with the

Chicago Bears in 1925 once his playing days at the University of Illinois were over "marked the beginning of a new era in Big Ten football" (132), pitting the game as it was played by college amateurs against the febrile appeal of paid professionals. In that environment, Big Ten members were helpless before the commercial demands on the sport, which were now driving decisions in their league on everything from recruiting athletes to scheduling games. Faculty control of athletics in that age of commercialized sports was, in Solberg's judgment, "a sham" (198).

No event proved the point more than the Big Ten's dismissal, and subsequent reinstatement, of the University of Iowa in 1929, which receives a full chapter treatment. Iowa's athletics program was accused of a constellation of bad behaviors: excessive alumni involvement, dishonest recruiting practices, slush fund payments to athletes. Iowa violated league rules, to be sure, but its truest offense was running afoul of the conference's power brokers, namely University of Chicago head football coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, who, Solberg observes, "did not understand the harsh realities of intercollegiate athletics" (188). It was a reality being remade by administrators and faculty leaders at Iowa and other members, who "were all complicit in promoting and defending corruption" and pushing the conference away from its founding notions of amateurism (198). "With delinquency so widespread," he argues, "the Big Ten was weakened and damaged" (198). Iowa's censure proved "epochal" not only "because it imputed bad faith, double dealing, and athletic dishonesty to the highest educational institution of a great state whose citizens naturally look to that institution for good faith, square dealing, and high ideals" (172). It was also, Solberg contends, a harbinger of the conference's twenty-first-century future. "Football had become less a game than a business, run for revenue, not for education," he laments of the Big Ten's current competitive landscape. "Moreover, football was played increasingly by men who were neither entirely amateur nor entirely hired. And football coaching was given by men whose preponderant interest was holding their lucrative jobs at whatever cost" (238). As "corruption became widespread, and intercollegiate athletics became commercialized" (241), Solberg closes his book, not with any solutions for fixing the Big Ten, but with a mournful, backward glance to the "worthy standard" of the conference's founding principles (239).